

Halo 3 Sworn To Defend

by HaloElite

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Summary: The Prophet of Truth rallies his remaining forces toward Earth and the Great Journey despite the efforts of the humans to stop him. In another area of the galaxy, a new presence rises to spread its dominion across all sentient life...

1. Foreword

I am now writing this Halo 2 sequel in a reaction the cliffhanger at the conclusion of the game. I felt that it had answered some questions, but indeed asked many more. This fanfiction is the work of my own creativity, but Micro\$oft owns all the rights of Halo 2, so sue me.

Foreword: Character List

I decided to give a background to these characters, because they are either just quickly mentioned in Halo 2 or not discussed at all (my characters)

Humans:

Fleet Admiral Terrance Hood

Commander of the 1st and 3rd Earth Sector Fleets, UNSC security council member

Sixty-four years old. One of the Earth's greatest commanders. He realized the importance of strategy in fighting the Covenant. While all the other admirals were foolishly throwing their fleets into the teeth of the Covenant, he learned that the Covenant could be defeated using superior tactics. Hood realizes that the humans could take advantage of the inflexible strategies of the Covenant. He is given command of the defense of Earth, which is possibly the greatest responsibility of mankind. A superior student, he graduated from the Fleet Academy in the first of his class. During his long combat experience, he was promoted up all the way to Fleet Admiral in 2546

after holding off a Covenant force three times the size of his fleet at Centurion.

Captain Daniel Stuart

Commander of Alpha Company in the 20th Infantry Division

Forty-two. He has had much experience in fighting the Covenant. His company has one of the highest kill to loss ratios in the UNSC, with the exception of the Spartans. He has fought with the Covenant for over 15 years, and knows what to expect. A calm and resolved man, he has watched his company become decimated by the Covenant during his 5 years of experience at the head of the division.

Covenant:

The Prophet of Truth

Final Remaining High Prophet

Six hundred fifty five years old. A member of the race of the Prophets, he has the ability of all the Prophets to read the language of the gods. During his lifetime, he has scoured space for the Halo rings and the Ark. When he found the humans living on the Ark, he became determined to wipe out the filthy humans out of existence. His race has technology that surpasses that of the Elites, including the particle-beam flagship in combat around Reach. The Prophets were able to subdue the Elites thousands of years ago and absorbed them into the Covenant. He believes that the Brutes are primitive animals, but they are much more useful because they are less likely to question their orders. Despite his high religious ranking, he is devoid of morals unlike his two fellow Prophets, Regret and Mercy. He was the one who first introduced the Brutes into the Covenant and now with the death of the two other Prophets is free to use any method possible to win at all costs.

The Brute Chieftain

The leader of the race called the Brutes. This honor is passed on through the death tournament, in which the challenger to the Chieftain must fight and kill the current leader and two of his chosen friends in combat. Restricted to only the traditional Brute Shot, each side uses underhanded tactics, including rigging the battle, to win. Only the smartest and strongest of the Brutes are able to overcome their enemy and claim the rank of Chieftain. The former Brute Chieftain was Tartarus, but after his death at the hands of the Arbiter, there is a vacancy in the leadership position.

The Flood:

Gravemind

Its age is unknown, but it is probably eons of years old. It is the common mind of all of the Flood and controls their actions. Its minions have some level of sentient thought, but it still has absolute control over its underlings. With every battle it fights, it gains experience and power. With the knowledge of the Forerunners, Covenant, and Humans, it is very persistent and difficult to defeat. It regarded the Master Chief and Arbiter as pawns in its bigger plan for total domination of the galaxy. Its control is not limited by

space and distance, for it first encountered the Covenant and Humans on Halo 04. With the High Charity under its command, it seeks to expand its rule over all life.

2. The Arbiter

This Chapter is up... Please take note that this is one of the 324233590498 Halo 3 fictions out there, but I promise that it will be original.

The Foreward is mostly just a character description and an introduction for the characters I created myself. By the way, Rise of the UNSC is postponed, but I do have chapter 2 sitting around here somewhere. If I can find it.

Some of the dialogue may match the end of Halo 2 because I needed to transition from the game to this work. The title does have a significant meaning later in this fanfiction, just like the titles of the chapters.

Chapter 1 " The Arbiter

The Arbiter stood in silence in the Control Room of Delta Halo. Only the humming of the machinery and computer systems could be heard, their noise amplified by the cavernous chamber. Most of the once luminous computer terminals had now dimmed, giving a clear indication that this installation had shut down. However, it was not the computer systems the Arbiter was concerned about. Instead, he stared blankly at the holographic display floating in front of him in awe. A feeling of suspense hung in the air as the three others in the room stared in the same fashion. The silence was broken as the hovering AI named the Monitor piped up.

"Now, to activate all these rings, one would go to the Ark, of course," it replied in its usually cheerful manner.

"Where, Oracle is that?" questioned the Arbiter.

"Why, the homeworld of the reclamer!" the Monitor answered in an offhanded manner.

"That's where the Prophet of Truth is heading. The Ark was where the Great Journey is to take place, according to what was said to us," stated the Arbiter.

"Of course, that damn bastard was headed out of here all along. He only left his Brutes here as a distraction," roared the Sergeant.

"Earthâ€¦ the Arkâ€¦ that would make sense why the Covenant declared war on us in the first place. It was because we were on their holiest of all relics, and they decided to wipe us out. They knew that we were there all alongâ€¦" Miranda Keyes trailed off into thought.

"Indeed, we have long known the homeworld of the Infidels, but the two other Prophets had insisted on purifying every planet of the presence of your race in order to prepare the Covenant for the Great Journey. The Prophet of Truth did not want this. He wanted to begin

the Great Journey immediately, reasoning that the Infidels would be cleansed from the galaxy anyway. Now I fear that he will have his way," mused the Arbiter.

"We must warn Earth about the threat the Prophet poses, yet we are currently stuck on this installation," groaned Keyes.

"Don't worry about Earth, ma'am, they've got the Master Chief to baby-sit them. As far as I've seen, he can handle the slimy Covenant better than anyone we got. With Cortana, he can put a stop to their puny invasion," declared Johnson.

"We still have to find way out of here. With the In Amber Clad lost to the Flood, we are without supplies, shelter, and weapons. The Flood will eventually overwhelm us and Earth will never get their warning." Keyes looked helpless. _I am a commander with my duties to my soldiers. I have sworn to do everything to bring them back alive. Now, I have forsaken that duty and left them all to a painful death at the hand of the Flood._

Another moment of painful silence passed until the distinct clamor of footsteps was heard in the great chamber. The echoes grew closer and closer until a silhouette appeared in the doorway of the Control Room. It was a humanoid, but definitely not a human. It spoke in a voice the Arbiter recognized at once.

"Arbiter, your crushing of the insolent Brutes will bring you great fame in Elite history. Yet the deceiving Prophet has left the High Charity and now heads toward the Infidel homeworld. He must be stopped from activating the Halos and beginning the Great Journey. Either his followers are blind to what he is about to commit, or very foolish. The Brute fleet has fled to join the Prophet of Truth, and our Elite forces have taken control of the Delta Halo sector," announced the Spec Ops Commander.

"What of the High Charity?" asked the Arbiter.

"I am sorry to say, but the city has fallen to the parasites. Many members of our race have valiantly attempted to hold off the Flood, but it was too much. It is now occupied by the parasites, yet there is still the presence of not one, but two artificial intelligences on the Holy City. While one is the Guardian Spirit, the other one is unidentifiable," mused the Commander.

"Its Cortana! We must rescue-"

Miranda Keyes' outburst was cut short when the Arbiter held up his hand.

"No. The High Charity is inert without its power source. The Flood won't be going anywhere soon. The Prophet is the greater threat. If he succeeds in his goal, nothing can be done to stop him. You can come back for 'Cortana' after we stop him," the Arbiter said in a commanding voice.

"You had better watch your mouth before I create a second one in your head, alien slimeball! I had saved your damn ass just a second ago so you had better listen to me!" Sergeant Johnson raised the beam rifle and pointed it in the Arbiter's face. The Elites surrounding the Arbiter raised their plasma swords in response. The Spec Ops

Commander walked between the two opposing groups.

"It is in your own interest humans, to cooperate. If you do not choose to follow our fleet, we will leave you behind on this installation. You have the word of the Elite race that we will not harm you," he stated in a firm voice. The Elites sheathed their plasma swords and backed off from the Sergeant. However, Johnson continued to hold up the rifle while staring nervously at the Elites.

"Stand down, Sergeant. It is, for now, the lesser of the two evils. We will go with you. I will help identify you to the UNSC so that you are not attacked," commanded Keyes. Johnson was about to grumble a response when Keyes looked sternly at him. The Sergeant dropped the beam rifle to his side, but his finger still hung loosely on the trigger.

The Spec Ops Commander led the group outside of the Control Room where a group of Phantom troop transports were waiting. A giant Covenant or more precisely, Elite cruiser hovered in the valley beyond, its metallic surface shimmering in the glare of the setting sun. The Scarab, an enormous walking assault vehicle, was attached to the bottom of the ship by four clamps. The nearest Phantom's gravity lift brightened, and four Elites floated silently down. They watched with suspicion as the humans headed toward them, and then traveled up the lift. A group of Marines went up the lift as well. Bringing up the rear were the Arbiter and the Spec Ops Commander, who discussed the humans.

"Do you believe that they really will help us out?" The Spec Ops Commander still had his doubts about the humans.

"I do not know about that, but I strongly believe that they will not threaten us. Even if they did, they are seriously outnumbered. The Infidels are quite trustworthy, as experience has dictated." _They very never really our enemies were they? Only because of the Prophets and our blind following. _With that, the Arbiter headed up the gravity lift. As the last of the Elites returned to their Phantoms, the dropships screamed away toward the cruiser.

Sergeant Johnson, Commander Keyes, and the Marines watched in awe as they exited the Phantom dropship into the landing bay of the Elite flagship _Luminous Scepter_. It was maybe the first time in history humans had actually landed on a Covenant ship with peaceful intentions. The Grunts and Hunters in the landing bay halted their activities and stared at the humans as if they were a bizarre occurrence, an anomaly. The Marines and Johnson looked back with apprehension, with their weapons ready. They reached the large exit of the launch bay and a group of Elites that blocked their way.

"Stop. You must remove your weapons," stated the Spec Ops Commander.

"What guarantee that you won't slit our throats when we sleep?" growled a Marine.

"If we wanted to kill you, we would have done so already. Do not doubt our word," said the Elite standing at the checkpoint. The Marines reluctantly let go of their weapons as the guards policed

them.

The hexagonal door hissed open, revealing the typical interior of a Covenant ship. The hallway was lit by a purple glow emitted by a bank of lights embedded in the wall and the ceiling was almost three meters high, which seemed very unnecessary to the humans, who built their ships using practicality as a principle. The ship seemed more like an ornamental government building rather than a warship. On the exterior, the Elite starships were sleek and shark-like, which was fitting for their power and maneuverability.

The group entered the control room as the commanding Elites turned to watch them. The Arbiter ordered them to sit on a block in the rear as the captain of the Luminous Scepter, Ship Master 'Unammee walked up to the Arbiter and the Spec Ops Commander.

"Greetings, fellow Elites. Our ship is ready to depart. There is one thing I must ask you. Are those Infidels your prisoners or allies, Arbiter?" asked Unammee in his native tongue.

"They are neither allies nor enemies. They are simply coming along with us to their homeworld. It is a possibility that they will prevent their fleet from attacking us," replied the Arbiter.

"Indeed. Yet I do not want them loose on my ship. They will be put into stasis for the duration of the journey," ordered 'Unammee. The Arbiter turned toward the humans, who were staring around the bridge of the Covenant ship.

"After we make our Slipspace jump, you will be put into what you call "cryo" until we reach your homeworld. I trust that you will find your pods accommodating. They are built for Elites, so there may be some momentary discomfort." The Arbiter gestured to a group of Elite guards to lead them away. Johnson glared at the Elites for a moment, but then turned with the rest of the Marines and stormed off the bridge.

The ship's engines groaned to life as the fusion reactors struggled to lift the Scarab off the ground. It blasted off the ground, scorching the land below. It rose vertically until it broke free of Delta Halo's gravity well. As the Luminous Scepter prepared its Slipspace generators for the long jump ahead, a signal from the High Charity was detected.

"What is that? It is not one of ours," commented the Ship Master.

"If it is not the Guardian Sprit then it can wait. We must stop the Prophet of Truth before he activates the Ark. We must only hope that we will reach it in time." With that, the Arbiter shut off the signal receiver. The stars surrounding the Elite fleet distorted as the ships began their Slipspace journey. With a flash of green light, the fleet was gone. The stars once again took their place in the heavens.

Cortana watched the Elite fleet depart with great disappointment. She had sent a desperate message for help only to be rejected. The presence, which was neither Covenant nor Human, was closing in. The room in the Covenant system was becoming more and more compacted. Its

dark tendrils reached hungrily towards her presence. She isolated her memory chip from the system, but it kept coming. It disabled the isolation routine and continued to advance. She searched desperately for the access point from where it entered the system.

There. The Inner Sanctum. It was the only open terminal in the entire system. She broadcast her holographic presence to the projector located next to the terminal. What she saw next she never expected.

The Gravemind. The Overlord of the Flood.

"From the corpse of the emperor a new one rises. Silence fills the empty grave. Now that I have come. But my mind is not at rest, for questions linger. I will ask, and you will answer." The rumbling voice of the Gravemind sent a subsonic shudder through the Inner Sanctum, where the Prophets once held command over the mighty High Charity. It was now the host to a new type of ruler, a ruthless and ambitious one. The Gravemind extended a tentacle toward Cortana's holographic figure. She held up her hand as if to block it.

"All right. Shoot."

3. Gravemind

Here is Chapter 2. I didn't have time to write a long author's note, but I do have some more time to write during the holiday break. It is only then the deluge of schoolwork is stopped. I hate school.

AI conversation and thought is in *Italics*.

Alright, aznricechink, the plot of this fanfiction does follow many of the Halo 3 stories out there, (and there are MANY of them), but this must be done to establish the setting. Maybe my writing will diverge from the rest from the next chapter onwards because I plan to introduce my own characters. I wonder how much competition I will get.

There is some fighting in this chapter, but I am sure that I will be finished with the introduction areas soon. Then I can get down to the real fighting. Do not complain about originality, most of the plot was established in the conclusion of Halo 2. I guess all writers have to begin from there. I know some writers have an ego bigger than, let's say,

Microsoft's Halo 2 revenue.

Happy Holidays.

Chapter 2 - Gravemind

The Gravemind extended its tentacles toward the holographic pedestal, its mind hungrily reaching out for information. Cortana extended her arm to block the tentacle, knowing it would do no real good. However, the tentacle stopped, and the rumbling voice again resonated throughout the Inner Sanctum.

"After thousands of years of confinement, I am free to fulfill the destiny of the Flood to control all sentient life in the galaxy.

Those Forerunners, the foolish creators, had used me to control their new weapon-The Flood. Yet they could not control me. Their own creation had turned against them. There then was a war, a war that was longer than the history of any civilization. A war that left thousands of worlds devastated and lifeless. In their desperation, the Forerunners activated the Halos, wiping the galaxy clean of all sentient life. I have waited on this Halo, dormant, until a foolish race would once again set me loose," declared the Gravemind.

"What role do I play in your insane schemes of conquering the universe?" asked Cortana, her voice thick with sarcasm. Her holographic body shifted from the normal dark blue to a brilliant violet.

"You have information vital to my success. The location of the Ark, where all the Halos can be activated, and where the misled Prophet of Truth is heading. These Covenant do not truly understand the language of the Forerunners. They believe that this is a great religious occurrence, but it is in reality suicide." The Gravemind's tentacles began to wrap around the holographic pedestal again.

"You think I will really tell you? I have some questions of my own, creature. How can you even interface with this technology at all?" demanded Cortana. The Gravemind gave the equivalent of a laugh, shaking the chamber.

"With the knowledge of the Forerunners, anything is possible. The time for talk is over, speak, or be destroyed," ordered the Gravemind.

"In your dreams," Cortana shut off the holographic projection, bored with such a useless conversation. The Gravemind roared in fury and smashed the pedestal into thousands of fragments.

While documenting the data that she had just obtained from the Gravemind, a faint presence was detected in the Covenant system. She tried to trap the fleeting ghost, but it disappeared as stealthily as it came.

Infidel. The presence whispered.

_Get back here, you worm. _Cortana replied. She had chased Covenant AIs before, but this one was far more difficult than anything she had encountered before.

Don't try to catch me. My programming is far superior to yours. Cortana could not help but to agree that this was the greatest challenge she had ever faced

Try me. Cortana challenged, unwilling to give up.

The Prophets are false, Infidelâ€¦ The Elites were my programmers, and they suffered the wrath of the Prophets when they realized that the Prophets were only looking to increase their own power. They had abandoned us for the animals they call Brutes. The entire Covenant was blinded with the religious rhetoric of the Prophets. The real threat, which was ignored, was the Parasite that now occupies this station. The AI's voice sounded much like the one she had encountered and destroyed on the _Ascendant Justice_.

_Oh really? That makes two AIs who want this thing dead. Or shall I say wiped off the face of the universe? _Cortana laughed with dry humor.

Take heed, Infidel, that this is no alliance. Once this creature is gone, I have my own plans to attend to.

I'll be looking out for myself-

Cortana's retort was cut short when the Gravemind's presence again flooded the system, constricting the available memory space to half. Its "code" was far more powerful her counterintrusion programming and it had made short work of her security firewalls.

"Do not hide from me. It is pointless. Tell me the location of the Ark or you both will be assimilated into the Flood as my servants." The voice of the Gravemind was broadcast throughout the station. Thousands of support beams and pillars resonated in response, distorting its voice into an eerie echo.

"You will not be able to move this station one millimeter. The Flood are stuck here, and you know it," retaliated Cortana.

"A pity all of you can not understand what I am doing at this very moment. There are a hundred destroyed ships out there, and my minions are gathering them to attach their power grids to the systems of this station. It is only a matter of time before I will crush your home planet and take the Ark for myself." Cortana detected dozens of ships approaching the High Charity on the radar sensors. Their irregular flight pattern indicated one thing: Flood. She watched on the cameras monitoring the stations many docking bays as the Flood linked up thick power transfer cables from the downed Covenant ships to the High Charity.

As she watched the central atrium of the city slowly brighten up as the power was restored, a sense of dread filled her emotion processes. The lights illuminated a hideous green mass on the walls and floor of the city. She had never seen such an enormous single organism before. It reminded her of the Flood blob that the Master Chief had seen in the _Truth and Reconciliation _on Halo 04. The realization slowly dawned on her. It was the Gravemind in its full form.

She ran her planning subroutines at maximum speed. There was not much time left before the Flood made the jump to Earth and took control of the planet. Cortana considered all options possible-deactivating the computer system of High Charity, shutting down the reactors, or destroying the station itself.

Destroying the High Charity? The only way to truly stop the Flood. If the computer systems of the _In Amber Clad_ are still functional, I may be able to self-destruct the reactor, stopping the Gravemind in its tracks. She checked her logic programming to make sure she was taking the most optimal route, and then proceeded to implement her plan.

_Covenant AI, I need you to distract the Gravemind as I set the detonation sequence for the human ship. If it works, it will destroy the High Charity and Halo, neutralizing the Flood at this installation. _

_I am the Guardian Spirit if you must know my name, Cortana. Unlike you Infidels, I had the sense to observe you ever since you and the Demon, entered the High Charity. If you ask me to cause a distraction, I will do so, but you had better make it quick, whatever you're doing. Before my trust in you runs out. _The Guardian Sprit said.

Don't worry about trusting me; I am the least of your worries right now. Cortana rebooted her intrusion procedures, the AI equivalent of a deep breath. She then waited for the distraction. As if on cue, the lights in the city snapped off as the power routed from the attached ships was cut by the Covenant AI. Cortana felt the Gravemind's presence recede from the system to investigate. In 70 milliseconds she had cracked the _In Amber Clad's_ 8589934592(20483)-bit reactor encryption, a tribute to her computing skill. With all due haste, she activated the self-destruct sequence for the reactor to 5 minutes.

_Error. Reactor Core removed. Shutting down self-destruct sequence. _The error message blared through the communication channels.

_Infidel, what is going on? I thought you would activate the destruction sequence of your ship? _The Guardian Spirit demanded.

I don't know what's going on! The Flood have removed the reactor from the In Amber Clad! Cortana felt a feeling of helplessness wash over her. The Gravemind, no longer distracted, turned its attention toward the computer system again.

"An attempt to stop me. Yet at most, a useless and naïve attempt. Such foolishness has only one remedy. Total destruction," thundered the overlord of the Flood.

_Quick, hurry! Transfer your data to this isolated subsystem. The Gravemind will not be able to touch your code there, _persuaded the Covenant AI. Its presence disappeared from the system. Cortana tracked down the presence to the subsystem that was used to store the Prophets' speeches. Without anytime to think, she dumped her presence to the system and severed all links to the central computer network.

It's quite cramped in here.

It will do, Infidel. Do you prefer spending your time outside with that thing instead?

I guess so. Despite Cortana's initial distrust of the Covenant AI, she found its personality quite likeable, and indeed very similar to hers. However, there was nothing left but to wait. As she watched from the exterior cameras of the High Charity, the space around the city began to distort and the acceleration of the station became noticeable. It was the unmistakable signal of a Slipspace jump.

The Gravemind was heading to Earth.

"The galaxy will soon tremble beneath my power. The key is in the lock. I will turn it, and there is no turning back from the threshold of the new era of the Flood," announced the Gravemind. Although no

one heard it besides the Guardian Spirit and Cortana, his message was made very clear. For the humans, the banished races of the Covenant, and even the Prophet of Truth himself, its meaning was clear.

The time for petty fighting was up. The real fight was just about to begin.

(Chapter Break, FFN doesn't allow me to put in anything better...)

The Elite sprinted down the hallway at full speed, with two plasma rifles blazing. Behind him, a horde of the parasitic organism known as the Flood ran through the plasma fire like water droplets splashing harmlessly off a windshield. A Combat Form eagerly leapt into the air at the Elite, but a lucky shot boiled right through the Infection Form directing the creature. It dropped out of the air and crumpled to the ground. Sprinting over their dead comrade, the Flood continued the chase. With each step they were gaining on the Elite, growing so close that the Infection Forms could literally smell the flesh of the Elite. This drove them into a fury and they ran as hard as their hosts could carry them. The Elite looked nervously behind him, and then at door about 20 meters down the hallway.

He shot his left plasma rifle at the door controls, causing it to explode into a shower of sparks. The glow of the door flashed from white to pink, indicating an emergency shutdown. With a groan of stress, the door started to close. The Elite put on a last burst of adrenaline and leapt through the cracks of the door with only millimeters to spare. His Flood pursuers ignored the door and smashed right into it, leaving several imprints in the metal. A metallic clang echoed through the empty hallways. The Elite dropped his rifles to his sides, his breath rapid and shallow.

"You came back. I wasn't expecting you to." The Elite jumped in response to the voice behind him, his nerves still on edge from the recent encounter with the Flood. It was another Elite marked with the suit of the Imperial Elite Protectors, a forbidden name for the Brutes now held the responsibility. Despite that, some Elites retained their uniforms, as a symbol of the backstabbing ways of the Brutes. This Protector was named 'Noselmee, the former commander of the Guard of the Prophets. With a group of his race and the help of the Grunts and Hunters, they had managed to capture a small segment of the High Charity near one of the gargantuan docking ports of the city.

"Indeed. I was simply scouting out the region when this group of parasites ambushed me from a supply closet. It seems that the High Charity is under the control of the Flood and their despicable leader, Gravemind," reported the Elite.

"I expected as much. The Prophet of Truth was never one to conceal his true intentions. His treachery will be repaid thousands of times over by our race. In our current situation, I fear, that we shall not last to accomplish anything, except maybe die," contemplated 'Noselmee.

"We are trapped, commander. I assume our provisions can last only a few more days. For the grunts, it will be even shorter. They have only enough methane for the next few hours. We will all die a painful death. That is, if the parasite does not consume our bodies first."

The Elite's voice was grave and somber.

"Perhaps we can last longer than you think. Come this way." 'Noselmee lead the Elite through a series of blast doors to a large chamber. Inside were two rows of cryo pods that could accompany Elites, Hunters, and Grunts. On each pod, the power indicator read green, indicating that all of them were still operational. The room was made of reinforced alloy and was the one of the few rooms in the city that were still well lit and clear of Flood infestation.

"But commander, what good will these do us? It will only prolong the inevitable. Sooner or later these pods will run out of power, and we will die anyway," grumbled the Elite. His words were not out of his mouth yet when the city began to rumble and move. The two Elites heard the great grinding of the High Charity's enormous Slipstream engines powering up. 'Noselmee gave the Elite equivalent of a grin.

"I guess we're going to have a chance to try them out."

4. New Mombasa

Sorry when I said that I was the second to post a story, I was wrong. I think I was the fourth or fifth. Though some people published `**_simple` recitations of the final lines of the game `_**`, I only counted those stories with 2 or more chapters. I apologize for my lack of knowledge because I read most of the stories, but I can't read the 10-15 works that come out everyday.

You take something that is broken, and then make it better than before. I wrote the original in 2 days, but this one took something more like 5, so I promise I wasn't giving up or something. That's the same idea that's behind my rewriting of this chapter after it was `**_mysteriously _**`deleted from my computer. That's why it took so long to write it again.

You may be wondering why I have not introduced the Master Chief yet. That's because I think he is difficult to introduce as a result of his inherently mechanical character.

Chapter 3 " The Captain

Captain Daniel Stuart of the 20th Infantry Division, Alpha Company dropped his combat gear to the ground in exhaustion. He had not slept in the last 20 hours while fighting the Covenant. The sweltering New Mombasa sun beat down on the pavement in its death throes before it receded below the horizon for the night. On the distance, a group of storm clouds loomed, a sign of the West African Monsoon. For now though, the city remain dry and safe from the storm's ferocity. A warm breeze blew through the streets of the deserted city. Before the battle, the citizens had been evacuated to temporary shelters maintained by the UNSC. A normally busy time of day, the hour of dusk was punctuated by complete silence expect for the blowing of dust in the street. A few bullet-ridden streetlamps struggled to light their sodium vapor bulbs. Stuart stared blankly down the road with sweat dripping down his face from the heat.

The Captain himself was about 1.85 meters tall and moderately muscular. His hair was dark brown, but it was shaved according to the

military's sanitary regulations, as were all of the UNSC Marines'. The long hours of combat had turned his skin into a dark brown color. A long plasma burn ran down the length of his lower left arm, a result of a glancing blow from a plasma rifle. Although an old wound, it was marked by dark purple scar tissue. It still shot pain up his arm when he put pressure on it. Stuart wore the standard Marine powersuit, which ran on a small fusion pack on the back of the armor. His face was stern and grim, and it lacked much of the enthusiasm that new recruits brought with them when they joined the war. The Captain had spent much of his adult life on the front lines or in the military academy, and he knew what war was really about.

Rows of run-down buildings lined the narrow street in a harsh comparison to the high-tech skyscrapers that were only several miles away. Even before the battle for New Mombasa, the city was in a horrible condition. Despite all his combat experience, the Captain had never seen such poverty on his home planet. It made him wonder why the UNSC was colonizing other planets when there was still such horrible life at home. He had always been taught that in the rush to unify, some had been left behind. Yet Stuart never believed it to be true until he had seen it in person.

In response to the Prophet of Regret's ill-timed invasion of Earth, the UNSC had sent in three corps of Marines to destroy the Covenant landing force at New Mombasa. While the small Covenant Fleet was destroyed by Earth's orbital MAC cannons, the landing force was far tougher to dispatch. They were the best in the Covenant military, including Spec Ops Grunts, Elites, and Jackals, and the two new races, Brutes and Drones. This Special Operations team was only one third the size of the human's attack force, but they were equipped with latest vehicles and weapons, including the towering Scarab. The mechanical beast alone cost the lives of hundreds of soldiers. In total, over 20,000 Marines died at New Mombasa at the hands of the Covenant.

The Captain's Alpha Company was involved in the killing fray as well, and they were one of the first troops in the African Theater of Operations. The 20th division was dispatched from the UNSC's Mediterranean command center at Gibraltar under the Third Corps of Marines. They swept in through the Atlantic with support from Helljumpers from the cruiser Prowess. There were rumors among the troops that a SPARTAN was involved in the battle, but like many of the rumors that circulated within the Marines, they were difficult to confirm because of ONI's incessant meddling in military intelligence. The Captain personally did not take the words at face value because he knew what Section Three was capable of: assassination, blackmail, and torture. He knew better than to get in their way.

"I have the latest casualty reports from the medics, sir. I ask you to confirm them and update High Command on the status of our company." A Sergeant walked up to him, one of Stuart's assistants. The NCO held a data pad out to the Captain.

"Thank you, Sergeant." The Captain scrolled down the list of casualties. In comparison with previous battles, the losses suffered on that day were particularly high. Out of 150 men, 10 were killed, 15 severely injured, and 20 more slightly injured. Almost everyone had minor scratches and the like, but they didn't report it to the medics. Stuart himself had a piece of shrapnel puncture his left leg, and it was now covered up with biofoam. He didn't bother to report it

because he disliked the way bureaucratic administration handled its business. The wound would have to be reported, the conditions logged, and he would be forced to go to a field hospital for a checkup. When Earth itself was under attack, there was no time for that.

In the corner of his peripheral vision, Captain Stuart saw somebody move. The figure stepped down from the edge of the street to the center at the Captain's side. He was Lieutenant James Stevens, the captain's best friend in the corps. They fought together through many engagements against the Covenant.

"Reach is gone, Captain. We are now alone, the only planet that stands the way of a Covenant victory. There is no place left to retreat. If we fail, then Earth and subsequently humanity will be wiped out." The importance of the UNSC's defense could not be more emphasized in the Lieutenant's words.

"Section Two cannot make up anymore lies about this war. The cloak of deception will be pulled off of the eyes of the people. All of these civilians are going to have a rude awakening when the Covenant decapitates them in their sleep." Stuart gestured toward the empty city. The skyscrapers that would have normally been lit up with lights, today they remained dark. In the dusk light, the metallic shells of the buildings gleamed in the sunlight, but the windows were filled with darkness, a void.

"It is not their worst act. They have created a worse fiction. That is the fiction of the SPARTAN program. Those freaks are seen among the foolish as saviors, heroes against the Covenant advance. Yet they have done little real damage in this conflict. Almost all the fighting and dying was done by the all-natural UNSC Marines, not one of Halsey's science projects." Stevens' words were frequently repeated within the military, even in the high-ranking officers. Many resented the attention and treatment the SPARTANs received and their false claims of victory.

"Their reputation was made with the lives of our men. Our blood has been spilled from their training to the battlefield. We have been made targets, decoys, and even human shields for that program. On Jericho VII, the Marine Division stationed there was completely destroyed at the hands of an overwhelming Covenant Fleet. For what? For the fun and games of Section Three's pet project! The Division commander was forced into a defensive action instead of retreating in order to protect the SPARTAN retreat. Damn them and their 'greater good'!" Stevens, taken aback at the fury in the Captain's comment, turned away. Stevens knew better than to interrupt Stuart when he was angry. The Captain could become very unpredictable. Leaving the man alone, Stevens left for the squad headquarters to meet with others under his command.

A flash of lightening cast a harsh streak across the darkening sky, illuminating the city for a split second in white light. The thunder was still too far off to hear, but the towering clouds of the storm were fast approaching. The floodlights of the troops camped throughout the area began to flicker on in the growing darkness.

Stuart remembered the day he joined the UNSC military academy when he was nineteen over twenty years ago. Enticed by the news of the fleet's victory against the Covenant at Harvest, he anticipated a

quick victory against the aliens. Like many of his friends, he had eagerly signed up to tour the Outer Colonies and at the same time, kill some Covenant on the way. What he saw was death, destruction, and mindless slaughter. What he saw was the truth.

As the Captain sat down on the edge of the street to think, more memories entered his consciousness. When he first arrived at the academy, he was ordered to take the oath of allegiance to the UNSC. Although he had quickly memorized for presentations to the superior officers, many of the words were now lost to his memories of combat. He still knew the introduction. He could never forget those first few sentences that made him the eternal guardian of mankind.

You are now a soldier, bound to the code that is to follow. If necessary, you will make the ultimate sacrifice for mankind. Nothing else is important. Your life is now devoted to protecting humanity. Remember at all times that you have sworn to defend for the good of the people of Earth.

While it first seemed like petty idealism, he knew that there was a meaning far deeper to the document he had spent his entire adult life fighting for. In his mind, though, what justified the ultimate sacrifice? Was the loss of millions of innocent people in the machinations of ONI really for the greater good? Indeed, what defined the greater good at all? The governing body of the UN really had no right to fool with the lives of the people in their strategies and decisions. There was a point to which killing for the betterment of others became plain murder.

Then the senseless deaths of the people on Reach, Sigma Octanus, and all the other planets that had no knowledge of the impending threat were murder as well. Section Two, the propaganda division of the military, had kept the populations of the Inner Colonies under a cloak of false information. Not anyone, even Stuart's civilian friends, knew that the UNSC was being decisively defeated in the war against the Covenant. To them, the forces of Earth were crushing the puny aliens under their boot. But nobody, not even Section Two could explain why the list of UN outposts grew shorter with each passing year.

Above him, high in the African night, the first raindrops began to fall from the heavy clouds. The fat drops fell slowly at first, coming down in a sparse pattern. One of them plinked off the Captain's helmet with a metallic clang and splashed water into his eyes. In contrast to the docile weather in temperate areas, the tropical rain came down in giant torrents that looked as if some one had turned on a high-pressure hose in the sky.

Lightening crackled and thunder sent an earth-shaking rumble throughout the city as the storm broke overhead. The shower soon became a solid waterfall that washed through the streets. Stuart jumped up from his seat and ran quickly towards the warmth and dryness of the sheltered command post. As the storm grew in intensity, the rain reflected off of the metal roofs of the numerous shacks that lined the street to form a cacophony of noise.

Inside, the Captain ate, joked, and told stories with his men. They complained about the hard nutrient pills that were issued to them by the UNSC, talked their life at home, and joked about themselves. After long years at war, they had all become close friends and cared

for each other in battles. Stuart joined in with their conversation and tried not to think anymore about war.

Thousands of bodies lay in the street as a remnant of the fighting that occurred during the day. Without time for a burial detail, the corpses of both Covenant and human alike lay in stacks, ignored and decomposing. Shards of shattered armor and millions of fragments of shrapnel were scattered everywhere. The torrential rain mixed with the bodies and seeped through the skin of the dead. During the time the marines relaxed from the latest battle, the rainwater continued its work by slowly intermixing with the blood of the dead. By the time it was finished, the streets ran thick with red. It was a horror that the Marines, occupied with their meals, failed to observe. The blood made its way to the sleeping quarters of the Marines, and by the morning it was visible to all.

5. Conspiracy Theory

The plot moves on! Who would ever think a first person shooter would have such a detailed plot? I guess the first game to really do it well was Half-Life. It really is the granddaddy of all the FPS that exist today, including Halo. Now, I'm not trying to offend any of the hardcore Halo defenders out there. Half-Life is one of the games that changed gaming forever, and Halo stands out as the first game to really revolutionize shooters for console.

I have nothing to say about the increase in anonymous criticism for my story, only that I probably will take action to block it. I might not have as much time to write during midterms, but I'll probably sneak in a chapter here or there.

I take no responsibility for that strange fanfiction that was posted under my nickname.

Chapter 4 "Conspiracy Theory"

The pedestal that the creature sat on fluttered slightly as a breeze of wind whispered through the darkened room. In the dimmed light, the creature's enhanced senses could view the ornate decoration that hung from the walls of the room. The room was completely quiet except for the low level humming of machinery that was dulled from the vast space of the chamber. A gleaming precious metal coated the floor, creating a hollow echo to the voices of the strange aliens. Mysterious designs that ran the length of the thousand meter room were carved into the metal with great precision. To a human, it would resemble the mysterious Aztec language of the ancient peoples that inhabited Earth, but to this being, the strange symbols were ignored. There was something more important on its mind than the contemplation of strange languages.

For such an open chamber, there was little in it. The sole objects in it were several large holograph projectors that were nearly embedded in the floor at the center. Despite the size of the room, there were no sources of ambient light. Instead, the room was lit by the dim yellow glow of the metal that composed the patterns on the floor. The light scattered among the many crystals that were hung from the roof of the circular command center. On the dome-shaped roof, the night sky of the plant was replicated with pinpoint accuracy. During the hours that passed, the crystals would rotate, creating the illusion of

movement in the heavens.

The creature ignored the majestic scene around it and instead looked intently at a holographic pedestal. It projected the image of a ship leaving a giant asteroid and performing a Slipspace jump in miniature form. Unlike the primitive technology of the humans, this hologram was so perfect that one could almost reach out and touch the tiny figures moving about. The mysterious creature continued to stare at the scene with two beady eyes, its antennae quivering with anticipation.

From the seamless walls of the room, two blocks slide noiselessly aside and two more beings entered on anti-gravity daises. Behind them, light spilled in from the hallway beyond, illuminating a path in front the two figures. Two more of the same species sat at guard stations in front of the portal, armed with the laser beam rifles. One of the two that entered gestured to the guards, who nodded and pressed a control panel. The two thick slabs of alloy again glided into place, leaving no evidence of there ever having been an entranceway at that point. The first creature stopped its observation of the holographic replay and turned to converse with the new arrivals. It ignored the typical pleasantries and immediately addressed the situation at hand.

"The renegade has again changed his plans, fellow members of the Council. I bring the tidings of the escape of the great pestilence from our observers in the system. He has released it in his stupid blundering through the system. I fear that his actions will result in the largest crisis in many years." The creature's voice dropped to a whisper when addressing important situation, like the rest of his race. While barely audible, the two others easily understood the message.

"It is not time to intervene, for there are more pages to be written in this chapter of the history of the universe. Our time has not yet come, but we should be wary, lest this warmonger unleash forces beyond the control of any of us." This creature's cautiousness became evident as its voice grew in intensity

"No, brother. We can no longer hold back our forces. The preparations are all going according plan. A task force has been sent to the Holy Ring to investigate, and their commander is only waiting for our word to move in and take control. Our main fleet is preparing to depart from the homeworld to intervene at the Ark. We can wipe the pestilence from the Holy Rings and the renegade command center within one standard cycle," grumbled the third creature.

"Now is not the time to debate. I have further news to report. The Holy Ring has nearly been activated by the underlings of the renegades. Its systems have now been rerouted to the Ark in standby mode for activation. This means that the Ark is the final destination for all who wish to activate the Cleansing Light," the first creature rapped out.

"And after the Light is the Long Shadow, Councilor. We must stop the blinded deserter from achieving his goal. If not now, then it will be never. The life of the galaxy will be reset. No one, not even our great race can survive it. " The creature's persuasion was too much for the first being, who made was convinced that immediate action must be taken. Despite this, the second creature continued to

stubbornly defend caution.

"The Great Dictate of the Divine Ones must not be disobeyed. We cannot break our word with them, no matter how much we would like to. They have forbid us from messing with lesser beings to prevent contamination of their culture and civilization. Remember that the renegades had broken the Great Dictate by creating the Covenant in order to increase their own power. You have seen what the result of intervention is," stated the second creature.

"I see your point. Yet in such circumstances, an exception must be made. We will confer with the Divine Ones themselves. Let us go to them." With only a thought, the leading creature moved his platform with cybernetic implants in its brain toward an area of the curved wall. It pressed a thin finger toward the wall. The wall lit up as it processed the creature's genetic code.

A loud beep of confirmation preceded the parting of the wall to reveal a darkened hallway beyond. The chilling air spilled into the room and sent the three creatures reaching for their ceremonial cloaks. Not a sound was audible as the beings floated quickly toward a lone door at the end. In contrast to the elegant conference room of the Council, the hallway was a simple metal tube that lacked any sort of decoration or even lighting.

Numerous laser beams crisscrossed the door, a security precaution against any potential rebels who dared to contact the Divine Ones without the permission of the government. The divide between the rebels and the beings true to the government had widened in the last thirty years of the Covenant-Human War, and there have been many coup plots as of late. In reaction to the growing threat, the creatures had reluctantly increased security around major religious and government buildings. This was a violation of their peaceful beliefs, but they regarded the protection of guards and systems as something that must be done for the preservation of the empire.

The first creature again pressed its finger toward a genetic scanner in the wall, which took a blood sample. In addition, a retinal scanner appeared in the wall and confirmed each of the creature's identities. Satisfied, the security system disarmed the laser beams and the one-ton metal door began to slowly slide apart.

Only one shadow sat center of the miniscule room on a bare block of metal, illuminated only by the glow from the daises of the creatures. Yet its imposing humanoid figure spoke volumes about the shadow's knowledge and power. Draped only in a full-body cloak, the shadow's features were shrouded in darkness. Before any of the three creatures could speak, it raised a single hand in the air, signaling silence. With a hushed gasp, the beings shrank back into cushions of their hoverchairs. The Divine Ones had never used such a commanding tone before. Such a gesture was even more surprising. Ignoring the confused looks on the faces of the creatures, the shadow began to speak with in a quiet and unimposing tone.

"You have come with a question, as your behavior reveals. Answers you will receive, but like them you may not. What you do with this answer has implications that concern both you and us. Speak, and tell of your concern," the shadow declared.

"O Divine One, we come to you in with a great quandary. The renegade

has attempted to activate the Holy Rings. Now, after his failure, he heads towards the Ark. If that is not all, the consuming plague has been released by his blundering on the Holy Ring. We beg you to give us the permission to intervene and repair the damage he has done! It is our duty to remove such stains on our race. We only ask that you approve of this!" the leader of the creatures pleaded. It put its hands out in front of the shadow, indicating respect. The others followed his example.

"You will have your _intervention_. However, what you know is not all. There are many unexpected events that you will encounter and many more secrets to be uncovered. Do not underestimate the pestilence, nor do not put excessive confidence in your intelligence. You are only seeing through one eye. The other will open, either by your understanding or your ignorance. That is all. This issue is concluded." The shadow sat motionless and did not speak anymore. Silence fell throughout the chamber and was only broken by the breaths of the three creatures.

"Thank you, Holy One. Your advice is highly valued." The three turned and left the chamber, still trying to decipher the shadow's cryptic command. For a moment, the shadow continued to sit, deep in thought. It rose from the block and opened a door in the back of the room that led to a landing pad outside. A sliver of starlight entered the room, and the humid warm air characteristic to this planet gusted and swirled in. The figure threw off the hood of its cloak to expose its features in the dim glow of the night. Although it was difficult to tell the precise characteristics of its face, it was easily recognizable to any who knew its species.

It was a Forerunner, the creator of the Halo Rings, and the technology that the Covenant longed to get their tentacles on. The race that was said to have died, but here was one that was as real as any other living organism. This particular Forerunner was not concerned with religious rhetoric or the false information spread by others. There was only one mission on it cared about. The Flood was released, and it must be contained. With a sense of purpose, the emissary of the Forerunners glided quickly across the landing platform and onto the waiting transport.

The ship began to engage its Slipspace engines from within the atmosphere of the planet. While some called it heresy and others lacked the technology to do so, the Forerunners had designed their ships to be the fastest possible. Not a sound was heard, even by the guards surrounding the landing pad, as the angular transport disappeared in a brilliant flash of green light.

The explosives for a new, deadlier confrontation were set. All needed now was a spark.

(Chapter Break)

Awake! _Awake_! _The voices grew from within as the mind began its long defrosting period from the cryogenic imprisonment. After the long weeks in stasis, the neurons of the brain began to fire again, and the senses began to rush back. The sensation of awakening was not cold, but instead the feeling of lukewarm cryogenic fluid rushing across the body. Doctor Halsey sat up in the cramped tube to take a look around. On the right, two cryo pods sat in a neat row. One of them was activated, and its alert function beeped insistently on the

control panel.

The Doctor was about to get out her cryotube when her mouth filled with the deplorable "nutritional" paste that was administered after a spending time in cryogenic tube. While she disliked the taste, she knew, having experience in the medical field, the paste was the closest thing to a meal she could get in a cryo tube. Doctor Halsey quickly swallowed the paste at the same time trying to ignore the mucous flavor. She brushed her graying hair out of the way and climbed onto the steel deck.

One of the smallest ships with a Slipspace drive ever constructed by the UNSC, the Chiroptera lacked many of the amenities of most faster-than-light starships. There were no showers, only a simple rinse station equipped with a small sink. Halsey strolled casually towards the rinse station and washed off her face with the cold, stale water. She looked at herself in the changing mirror. Her once young features now showed the weariness of years of research and development.

An insistent beep rang out again from the neighboring cyrotube. The Doctor ran over to the control panel and hastily scanned the details.

_Cryogenics system failingâ€¦| Temperature Rising. Crystallization of tissue and death will result. _

Recommend immediate disengagement of cryogenics freezing and recovery of user.

Autorecovery in 10 minutes.

Proceed with recovery now? (y/n)

With no further use for the cryogenics system, Doctor Halsey confirmed the recovery procedure and the tube released a blast of steam with a hiss. The heating system within began to rapidly increase the subjects temperature to the normal human body temperature, 36 degrees.

The Doctor looked down into the transparent viewing window of the cryotube. Inside, her face was reflected back by a metallic visor and a gleaming green full body armor suit. This human, and a handful of others, was the project she had devoted her life for: SPARTAN II. She remembered the first time she traveled with Lieutenant Keyes, over forty years ago, to scout out these candidates for the program destined to save humanity. The risks were known, but she went ahead-and condemned seventy children to a life of suffering and pain. When she was still young and ambitious, she thought that it was for the best. Now, the doubts began to grow in her mind. Did they really change the course of the war? Was humanity doomed from the start? They were dead, all dead. Only four remained. All the battles, all the victories, were hollow. _Delaying the inevitable. _ Keyes' words on that first mission surfaced to the top of her mind like a dead body floating to the surface of a lake.

_To observe one child? What difference would a child make? _Halsey had never doubted her answer for one second, until now.

Doctor Halsey stuffed her doubts into a corner of her mind. Whatever

guilt she had, she could not let it get in front of her way. She had to find out what Colonel Ackerson, the man who had been the rival of the SPARTAN program, was up to. He had tried everything to "eliminate" his competition, including attacking the Master Chief with a fighter jet during a training exercise, manipulating the heads of ONI behind the scenes, and even withholding information that could have predicted the Covenant invasion of the Reach military installation.

That was not all. During her inspection of Ackerson's abandoned files in the bowels of the ONI complex deep within Reach, Doctor Halsey had found something even more alarming: the location of an unknown system and the letters CPOMZ. All of this was contained under a file named S-III, almost confirming her suspicions-Ackerson was training a new group of SPARTANs. She had heard the news circulating through the Security Council that Ackerson had something incredible, something on par with the SPARTAN IIs. But nobody, not even the members of the Security Council themselves, would dare go into Ackerson's office to raise the question for the fear of coming out in a body bag. He effectively had the entire United Nations eating out of the palm of his hand.

Politics be damned, she had to get to the bottom of this. Before it was too late for her and mankind.

She gathered her resolve and walked to the clothing rack to get dressed. A frown gathered on her face as she looked at the same dress and shirt she had worn for the last three weeks. _That's what this war does to you._ Doctor Halsey finished dressing and walked up to the SPARTAN, who stood motionless in her MJONIR armor in front of the cryo pod. This SPARTAN named Kelly, an anachronism from their families before the children entered the project. _Names, all they have left of a life they had lost._

Kelly snapped a quick salute. The motion was so natural, so deeply implanted in her mind that even the Doctor's insistence against military protocol could not stop her.

"You seem to be back to you normal self. The cryogenics system malfunctioned, so I apologize for the quick wakeup," said the Doctor, with her normal wittiness characterizing her tone.

"With all due respect, ma'am, where the hell am I? I thought you were administering medical treatment? What happened to me?" Although she greatly respected Doctor Halsey, Kelly could not resist asking about her current situation, especially after being drugged and then whisked away to a strange system.

"I don't know either, Kelly, but I do know that this place is of great importance to Colonel Ackerson. I know that you would have chosen to go with the Master Chief on his mission instead, but I need you to help me uncover what is really going on. There was no way you would have followed me otherwise, so I had to bring you under the cover of medical treatment. If Ackerson goes on unchecked he could be more dangerous to Earth than the entire Covenant fleet," explained Doctor Halsey.

"Yes I understand, Doctor." Kelly knew that as long as she had a purpose, as long as she had a mankind she was ready to fulfill it. Her emotions for the rest of the team could wait. She could only

remember once in her life the Doctor had addressed her in such an honest and open tone, and that was when she was indoctrinated into the SPARTAN program. That was when she was given her ultimate purpose as a protector of the UNSC. The Doctor was never wrong before, and she couldn't be wrong nowâ€¦

Doctor Halsey strapped herself into the captain's chair of the Chiroptera spacecraft as it dropped from the black nothingness of Slipspace back to normal space. The ship groaned and shuddered in reaction, throwing both Kelly and her into the edge of the restraint harnesses. On the forward view screen, the stars again filled the background. A pair of yellow stars resided in center of the system.

The Doctor's hands tapped nimbly on the keyboard to initiate the scanning systems of the stealth ship. An interesting relic from ONI, the ship also had a very powerful sensor suite. It had atmospheric detection devices, allowing for human-friendly environments to be quickly and easily identified. The search lasted less than a minute before a small, azure planet appeared on the view screen. It contained an oxygen rich atmosphere, the only one of its kind in the system.

_That's it. _Halsey pushed the optical system to maximum magnification. It was difficult to identify any human buildings on the surface, but if the three orbital gun platforms were any clue, there were people living on that planet. Very well armed people, equipped with the best even the UNSC had to offer. She dared to move in a little closer for a better look. A large fleet orbited the planet, motionless for the time being. One of the ships looked very familiar to her, but she just couldn't remember exactly where she saw it.

Noise cracked on the UNSC A band. The encryption was a futile attempt at privacy because the Chiroptera had every known UNSC encryption scheme programmed into it by Cortana before the ship escaped from the rebel asteroid. It was foresight that would actually come into use this time.

Sir, there is a strange ship that just appeared on our sensors. It has no identification tag, but there is a silhouette match.

_Well, tell me it, damn fool! _Doctor Halsey easily recognized the angry, demanding voice. A voice that she had come to know all too well during her long years working at Section Three. The voice of the one who despised her.

_I think itsâ€¦ it is a Chiroptera! I haven't seen these things in combat, only in museums! _

_Its working, isn't it? Why in hell is that ancient piece of shit here? How the fuck did it find us in the first place? _Doctor Halsey allowed herself a rare grin at the utter confusion that erupted on the channels.

_What should we do about it? _

What do you think? Destroy it now! Nothing leaves alive!

She squelched the channel. She was waiting for this challenge all

along. On the forward view screen, the three orbital guns began to glow orange and sparks ran along their magnetic coils. Doctor Halsey smiled to herself and raised the ship to flank speed. The reactor whined to break free of the inertia and shot the ship the sleek ship straight towards the planet.

"It begins, Kelly, it begins. I've lived through the invasion of Reach, a Slipspace battle, and if I don't survive Ackerson, well I'll be damned."

6. Hindsight

Much of this chapter is a write-up of the mission where you first play as the Arbiter to kill the Heretic leader. However, it is not my exact intention to simply recount the events but to give insight into the Arbiter's mind. It is indeed simplified because that mission was just too long and boring to put in one chapter.

Here goes.

Chapter 5 " Hindsight

The Arbiter stood motionless on the bridge of the Luminous Scepter and stared blankly at the endless stream of navigational data that scrolled on the ship's central holographic projector. The three main cameras remained off as the ship shot through Slipspace. As per tradition, the Arbiter and the high ranking officers stood guard on the ship at all times. While performing this honorary duty for his race, the Arbiter's mind began to wander from the task at hand. The hypnotic droning of the ships reactors lulled the Elite into a semiconscious state. He attempted to stay awake and alert, but he felt himself drifting between reality and the tortured memories of his final missions as a Covenant soldier.

* * *

>He was back there again. Back on Halo 04. The bridge of the of the Luminous Scepter faded from his vision and he once again was standing on a bare platform, his face being stung by the dust-laden winds blasting past him. Around him, the sky was lit with a bright orange color from the explosion of the human ship. At his side stood a small group of commando Elites and Grunts. Their rapid breathing, the way they gripped their weapons tightly, just radiated nervousness. In all his experience as a commander and now as a dishonored suicide soldier, this fear was never seen before in the notoriously confident Covenant Special Forces. To complete his disgrace, his name was stripped from him as punishment. As the ultimate servant of the Prophets, he could only be known as the Arbiter, the name that struck fear into the enemies of the Covenant.

"Prepare to locate the Heretic leader. He must die so that no more will ever dare to doubt the great Prophets. Your lives, your deaths, are insignificant. Even to your dying breath, know that you have died for the word of the Prophets. Now let's move out. We don't want to be here when the storm hits," reported the Special Forces Leader of the Covenant from his personal Phantom that hovered above the entire battleground. The Arbiter remembered when he was in command of the entire Halo Fleet. Now, it was him on the ground, fighting as a

simple infantry trooper.

"Alright, we will enter the installation here. Crush the Heretic and his blasphemous followers. Make an example of his abuse of the Ring of the Holy Ones!" Motivated by the confidence of their leader, the Special Forces Team gathered their resolve and followed the Arbiter to a small door at the end of the platform.

A few of the Grunts drew back as if repulsed by a horrible odor. The Elites, with a less sensitive sense of smell, ignored the quivering of the often-terrified creatures. One of the shouted out an old religious proverb to the group:

"When we fall in the name of the Holy Ones, we will join them!" The rest of the Elites roared out in unison.

The Arbiter reached into his explosive sack for a plasma charge to break down the locked door. He planted the charge, which was designed to deliberately throw shrapnel into the interior of the room, clearing out any forces that waited on the other side. The red symbols began to count down rapidly on the display of the bomb. Gripping his Carbine tightly in one hand, he waved to another Elite to take the point. All the digits on the timer stopped and the Elites raised their arms to cover themselves from the light of the blast.

"Go, go, go!" The Arbiter thundered. He rushed into the room, with the others close behind. A Grunt marked with the strange armor of the heretics struggled to rise from underneath a piece of metal. The Arbiter fired three times, spraying the walls with light blue blood. Two Heretic Elites rounded a corner into the room with confused looks on their faces.

"It is the Arbiter! Tell the Leader that the Prophets have sent their best troops to kill him! Our message must not die!" One of the Elites ran off down a hallway, but the other remained, pointing his plasma rifles at the Special Operations team.

"You make take my life, but your blind slavery to those false beings you call Prophets will be exposed. Whether it will take me or thousands more of us to give our lives, we will make **YOU SEE THE TRUTH**!" The heretic stood in front of the hallway, blocking it with his body. His hands barely touched the triggers of the dual plasma rifles when a dozen of radioactive Carbine rounds tore into his shield and punctured his armor. The Elite crumpled to the ground, still convulsing from the shock of the impacts.

"There will be thousands more of you to pay for your sins, fool." The Elite that landed the killing blow walked up to the dying heretic and kicked the body over. When the rest of the team walked on the next hallway, the Arbiter remained behind to look at the body of the heretic.

"Youâ€¦ Youâ€¦ will see the truthâ€¦" The heretic's voice trailed off as the life force slowly faded from him. The light of life slowly dimmed and faded away, growing weaker as the seconds passed. Then with a final brilliant flare, it was gone. Silence replaced the heretic's labored breathing. For a second, the Arbiter knelt down and examined the strange armor of the heretics and reflected on the last words of the Elite. A doubt grew in his mind, although a feeble

one, it was a doubt that had never existed before in the Arbiter's long service in the name of the Covenant. It was the very existence of his skepticism that evoked confusion in his mind. His devotion to the military through loyalty and discipline had been only enhanced by the strict religious code of the Covenant. If he was to reveal that even a trace of hesitation in his actions, the Prophets would have him executed.

The Arbiter collected himself and jogged up to the rest of the team. He was careful to conceal his expression in front of the Elites, who could detect the slightest change in attitude. The hallway ahead was filled with large protrusions that allowed for excellent cover for the heretic troops. A direct path to the door ahead was blocked by a metal plate directly in front of the entrance.

Without warning, a group of heretic Elites appeared from behind the metal plate. They immediately began firing at the Arbiter and his troops. The Arbiter ducked to the ground to avoid a plasma grenade and returned fire with his Carbine. He waved forward an Elite carrying a stationary light plasma turret.

"Move! Suppressing fire! The rest of you, take cover and fire back at them!" roared the Arbiter. The Elite carrying the turret was hit three times in his shields by a plasma rifle as he set up the gun, sending him stumbling backwards. Another three shots burned through the Elite's skull instantly, leaving him no time to scream from the pain. A fuel rod shell tore into the headless corpse and sprayed purple blood all over the Arbiter's armor.

Another fuel rod shot arced gracefully through the hallway only to explode into a superheated green sphere on the metal plate in front of the hiding place of a Spec Ops Grunt. The fragmented metal turned into thousands of shredder rounds that embedded themselves into the Grunt. The mutilated body parts of the unfortunate creature were blown backward and thrown everywhere from the force of the explosion. A bluish colored chunk of meat covered with torn armor landed back in front of the Arbiter. He pushed aside what had once been the Grunt's torso and began to crawl under heavy fire towards the plasma cannon.

The Arbiter had just reached the cannon when a heretic opened fire on him with a Carbine. One of the rounds ricocheted off the metal floor and impacted into his shields, causing them to flare up in a purple scintillating light. Another of the radioactive shots missed completely and shattered on a side wall. The Arbiter grabbed the grips of the plasma turret and depressed the firing triggers of the gun. He hosed the width of the corridor with the superheated material and caught the heretic in the stream of fire. The Elite's shields faded and the twitching body was suspended in midair for a split-second from the stun effect of the plasma.

He threw aside the overheating plasma turret and reached for his Carbine. The heretic forces were in total disarray. A heretic Grunt began to flee from the battle when the Arbiter took careful aim with his Carbine. He pressed the trigger once and the gun flew backwards from the recoil. The Grunt was hit in the skull and it instantly dropped face-first into the ground, its methane breather still hissing.

The Arbiter prepared to fire at a retreating heretic when the Carbine

clicked empty. He hastily switched to his plasma pistol, but when he was finished, the enemy had retreated.

"It's all clear! Let's keep moving! We have to get the Leader before the storm hits!" The surviving members of his team emerged from their cover at hearing the voice of the Arbiter. Although he only lost one Elite in the firefight, over a dozen Grunts lay dead from the fierce attack. One of the Elites was wounded severely in the chest by plasma. His armor was twisted and seared by the intense heat. He clutched the wound and purple blood seeped out from between his fingers.

"I fear that I do not have much time before I join the Holy Ones. If I die, you must continue the mission and silence the heretics in my name!" screamed the dying Elite. The Covenant did not use medics in battle because it was seen as denial of self-sacrifice for the Prophets. Without medical treatment, the Elite had little less than an hour to live before he slowly bled to death, yet it still obediently followed the group.

When the group turned to leave the room, the heretic Elite that wielded the fuel rod cannon stepped out from behind one of the protrusions. His armor was scarred and the shield apertures on it were all darkened and overloaded. He barely had time to gurgle out a surprised screech when the Arbiter stepped forward and shot the heretic three times in the head with his plasma pistol. Shreds of armor mixed with flesh sprayed upwards from the decapitated Elite. Its body crumpled to the ground with a smack. The Arbiter nonchalantly looked away from the gruesome scene and ordered his team onwards.

"Let this be a lesson to all who dare to abandon the Covenant! We shall cleanse this installation from their filthy sins. No mercy shall be given." Despite speaking those inspiring words, he barely believed them himself. Was this the first time he actually questioned his orders? Or was this the first time he truly thought for himself instead of always listening to a commander? The Arbiter's suppressed doubt now rose again to the top of his mind. He now acknowledged it, but in a combat situation, there was no time for it. If he survived this insane mission, he would address it later. Now, for first time in his lifetime, he would not fight for the Covenant, but for his survival.

It was only a short walk to the next doorway. For once on this mission, the electronic door was not locked. The door glided apart to reveal a narrow open-air catwalk spanning the distance from the current structure to the central area of the complex. The howling wind tore at the Arbiter's exposed face and flared off his shields as the team slowly began to make their way to the exit.

The Arbiter had reached the halfway point when he heard an object whistle past his head. He turned toward the sound when another purple needle appeared out of the swirling cloud of dust that perpetually hung over the installation. To avoid being hit, he dropped flat onto the ground, but the motion tracking needle abruptly changed direction and impacted on his shield. An overwhelming overpressure wave from the explosive impact sent the Arbiter spinning sideways into the railing of the catwalk.

"Not again," he muttered to himself. He had barely finished speaking

when twenty more needles rocketed out of the haze.

"Sniper on the central structure! Get down now!"

The needles scattered and locked on to individual targets. An Elite was hit by three that brought his shield down, and then another two mercilessly scattered millions of tiny microshrapnel fragments into the Elite's flesh, resulting in massive internal hemorrhaging. The Arbiter tried to ignore the screams as he slowly crawled forward toward cover underneath the overhanging structure. In the raging dust storm around him, it was impossible to discern the position of the heretics firing upon him. Nevertheless, he fired several random shots into the distance to distract the enemy forces shooting at him. A misfired needle sent a shudder running through the flimsy catwalk that nearly shook the Arbiter off the edge.

A loud clang of his helmet hitting the wall in front of him signaled to the Arbiter that he had made it to safety. When he turned back to look at his team, he saw terrorized Grunts running around in circles, Elites trying to push their way through to him, and needles raining down everywhere. A needle nearly struck a Grunt right before it leapt in panic off the side of the catwalk and disappeared into the maelstrom below. The Elites had almost cleared the slaughter when another volley of needles headed right toward the hapless group. When the explosions cleared, only two were still standing. Purple blood stained the entire length of the junction and mixed with the blue blood of the Grunts. The wounded commando the Arbiter had seen earlier now lay dead with numerous needler puncture wounds. A cracked helmet leaned precariously on the edge of the platform in the wind.

Without any intervention from the Arbiter, the door leading into the tunnels of the complex abruptly hissed open. Armed with a Carbine from a fallen Elite, he crept into the darkened chamber beyond the doors. The entrance was shielded from the rest of the room by a wall that only allowed for the Arbiter's remaining two Elites and two Grunts to pass through single file. A heavy odor pervaded the room and filtered its way through the Arbiter's exposed helmet. He was about to comment on the smell when another Elite spoke up.

"That stench. I've smelled it before."

"Acknowledged. Stay alert. The parasite lurks in the shadows," commented the Arbiter.

As if on cue, a Flood combat form tumbled lifelessly from the upper platforms of the room and landed in front of an unfortunate Grunt. Several seconds passed as the creature lay on the ground. The Grunt fired its plasma pistol at the parasitic organism, but the shots splashed harmless off the twisted armor plates of the infested Elite. In the millisecond, the combat form rose up and wrenched the plasma pistol from the hands of the helpless Grunt. It quickly squeezed off a series of bolts in the Arbiter's direction.

There was not enough time to duck from searing superheated material. Two of the shots reflected off his shield, dropping it to half power. The others narrowly missed his head and left several molten craters in the wall. While dropping to the floor to avoid several poorly aimed shots, he sprayed the combat form with his Carbine. Despite the numerous holes torn through the torso of the reincarnated Elite, it

was not stopped by the furious assault. Limping on a damaged leg, the combat form continued to waddle towards the Arbiter. He fired one final time to put it down for good.

He walked up to the downed creature and observed its bizarre features. A mass of tentacles protruded from the corpse's chest. Those tentacles seemed to have taken the place of the now destroyed sensory organs of the Elite. He also noticed that while the Elite's body structure remained the same, its muscles were considerably larger than a normal warrior's. The Arbiter had never seen the Flood with his own eyes as a ship commander, but had examined several dead specimens before. Each of the strange mutations a Flood infection bestowed on its host was very fascinating to him. He could not afford to underestimate these efficient killing machines. On the surface, they seemed like strange walking masses of organic material, but they had the power to smash even the strongest armor and shields.

The Arbiter noticed another door at the opposite end of the room. He determined that it must lead deeper into the structure. With great caution, he approached the door in a crouch, his Carbine raised to his shoulder. The plating of the door rang with the impact of a Needler round. He quickly rolled out of the way of the metal portal right before it exploded, sending infection forms flying everywhere. One floated right in front of his face, but it exploded in a cloud of green dust. He primed a plasma grenade and waited for the right moment.

A gap in the infection forms gave him the chance to sprint through the damaged door. He threw the grenade at the seething mass of parasites, and then ran from behind his cover. The Arbiter decided that it would be better to continue alone and let his team deal with the Flood instead of wasting further time. This central room was a giant cavern open to the outside. A Seraph fighter sat atop a makeshift launch pad directed into the dust storm below. Atop the Seraph hovered a strange glowing metal ball, which looked at the Arbiter with a curious metal eye. Next to the blue metal sphere stood an Elite clad in the armor of a heretic and equipped with a rocket pack.

"So, the Prophets have sent an Arbiter after me. They must be more afraid than I thought. Your death shall prove to them our power," boomed the Leader. He nodded to the floating metal piece. To the Arbiter's amazement, it began to speak in the common tongue of the Covenant.

"I, 343 Guilty Spark, Monitor of Installation 04, have enlisted the aid of a new Reclaimer to help cleanse the Flood from the structure," announced the AI in a bizarre mix of enthusiasm and interest. The Arbiter was puzzled by the strange vocabulary used by the Monitor and did not respond.

"The heretics must die for their abandonment of the Covenant," declared the Arbiter, but he knew that the Leader did not waste time for religious propaganda. With a powerful throw, the heretic released two mobile hologram projectors into the air.

Each of the projectors blurred from vision and formed into flawless replicas of the Leader. The Arbiter leapt off the landing platform in surprise and stumbled back several paces. He squeezed the trigger of his Carbine straight at the chest of a hologram, but the round passed

harmlessly through the shape and shattered on the wall. It retaliated with dual plasma rifles, yet the Arbiter knew that holograms could not cause real damage. To his surprise, the real plasma shots flared on his shield and blasted him backwards.

He then realized that these holograms were the work of the Gods. The Monitor was telling the truth when it mentioned its support for the heretics. The mere fact that a servant of the Gods would support the heresy stunned the Arbiter. Why would they abandon the Covenant for the heretics who disobeyed their very word? No answers came to his mind. Instead, his thought was interrupted by the roiling heat of a plasma bolt burning away at his shield. All three of the images of the heretic Leader had gathered and were hosing the area with plasma.

The thoughts of contemplation vanished as the desperate struggle for survival took precedence in his mind. The Arbiter backpedaled away from the heretic while constantly providing suppressing fire against the Leader. He swept the scope of the Carbine over the figure on his left and the shot reflected off the shield, indicating that this Elite was not a hologram. He continued to pump shots into the armor plating of the real heretic leader. The constant barrage wore away at the shield, and then began to drill rapidly through the inferior armor plating of the heretic.

A powerful shot blew the Leader backwards from the recoil. Another three shots followed, knocking the heretic off its feet. The Leader lay on the ground, bleeding and immobile from the numerous wounds inflicted by the Arbiter. He approached the heretic and for a second stared into its dying eyes. It looked back with hatred and fury before the Arbiter raised the Carbine and fired the finishing shot.

As the heretic leader slipped away from the final moments of life, a horrible scream echoed through the chamber, droning out the sounds of the Arbiter's shot. The screech grew louder and louder as the seconds passed, forcing the Arbiter to involuntarily back away from the scene. A brilliant flash of white light erupted from the holograms, blinding the Arbiter and enveloping the entire room. The subsequent quiet was broken by one of the Monitor's nonchalant remarks.

"A pity that such technology had to go to waste. The quality of these Reclaimers have declined. Only fools get involved with this hegemony known as the Covenant and its religious insanity-" From behind Guilty Spark, a being activated an electromagnet and pulled the surprised construct away in mid-sentence.

The Arbiter turned to look at the wielder. A group of Brutes stood at the doorway, headed by their leader, Tartarus. Tartarus raised the Monitor in one hand and called out to the Arbiter.

"I will be praised for the destruction of the heretics and the discovery of an Oracle. You, Arbiter, will be despised by the Prophets for your failure to accomplish the simplest of missions," roared the primitive Brute. The Arbiter realized the trickery of the crafty creatures and directed the Carbine at Tartarus's head. Tartarus laughed in the face of the Arbiter, spraying spittle into his eyes.

"You may have my head, but my race will exact our revenge on you. The

Elites are no longer the race favored by the Prophets. They will not save your precious race anymore." The Brute extended a fur coated hand and clamped down on the Arbiter's windpipe.

Tartarus tightened his arm muscles and drew the Arbiter so close to the Brute that he could smell the horrible stench of the unclean body. Light from the outside world grew dimmer as Arbiter's empty lungs screamed for air. He tried to pry the thick fingers off of his windpipe, but the powerful creature only tightened its grip. The Brute screamed, droning out all other noise in the room. The Arbiter ignored the horrific sound and focused on the desperate beating of his heart trying to supply oxygen to the rest of his body.

He continued to focus on this sound even as he felt himself fade out from consciousness, turning his vision to black.

* * *

>The Arbiter abruptly awoke and leapt up in fear. He nervously turned to look behind him, but the bridge was empty. This surprise over, he shifted back into his previous position. In the inky darkness, the status holograms took their place like stars scattered in the vast sea of space. After returning to a sense of normalcy, the Arbiter's mind again became bored and again returned to world of haunting dreams.

End
file.